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THE REVOLUTIONARY CYCLE IN SYNDICALISM¹

The evolution of French unionism in the last fifteen years is rather interesting to the student of popular movements. It epitomizes within a short period of time the revolutionary cycle: intransigence, expansion, opportunism, and scission. The sequence is familiar, it is true, but is worthy of being traced out in this instance for the light it casts upon the present condition of affairs in the world of French labor.

We may begin with the Congress of Amiens in 1906. At that time the extreme element in the Confédération Général du Travail (the C.G.T.), secured a dominating position and the congress definitely threw down the gage to socialism. It affirmed that "the congress decides that in order that syndicalism may attain its maximum effectiveness, economic action should be exercised directly against the class of employers, and the confederal organization must not, as trade union groups, pay any attention to parties and sects which outside of them and by their side, are at full liberty to work for the transformation of society." By 1911 this view had become well established as a theory of labor-group action. Playing an independent hand, the C.G.T. was rapidly achieving ascendancy over the minds of the working class of France. "*Cegetisme*" was in the air. Even though a "minority of a minority," this rabidly class-conscious group soon developed a powerful position on the left flank of the left wing. Active in propaganda, ruthless in its strike tactics, and untiring in its assault upon capitalism, from this coign of vantage, syndicalism threw its barbed darts into parliamentary socialism and moderate trade unionism. At the same time it drew to itself, as a magnet, all the restless spirits in the stormy arena of French proletarian politics. Even Jaurès, the skilled and persuasive leader of the socialists, whose eloquence had so often captivated the Chamber of Deputies, required all his resources of conciliation and ac-

¹ For a study of the rise of syndicalism, see Vol. XIX, Nos. 1 and 2, 1911.

commodation to avert a complete rupture between his followers and the C.G.T. Jaurès never won more difficult laurels than those he gathered as a conciliator at the congresses and conventions of French labor in the years immediately preceding the war. Today, Jaurès' views are a faded memory and the theories of the C.G.T. reign in their stead.

The C.G.T. soon succeeded in its claim to dominate the policy of the French trade union world. Rejecting the Marxian theory of tactics, it classified the socialists as a political party and therefore outside the legitimate purview of the trade unionist. "I know no political party," said the syndicalist, "and therefore I cannot take cognizance of socialism. In its presence I am neutral." Just as the socialists declare religious conviction to be a private matter and outside their movement, so, in turn, syndicalists consigned parliamentary socialism to the limbo of "old, forgotten, far-off things and battles long ago." In France, the distinction between ordinary Marxian socialism and the theory of the wage-earning syndicalists, as a direct revolutionary body, is no longer in dispute. The line of demarcation has been sharply defined. The assertion of the syndicalist movement has been re-affirmed at successive congresses of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* in a manner that does not admit of misinterpretation. This is one of the interesting, if not the most important, developments that the last decade has established.

While the disentanglements of the two movements is now complete in theory, actually it is far from being real. The French workingman, as a syndicalist, denies the usefulness of the present-day Marxian tactic of constitutional revolution and declines to affiliate his organization with the socialistic party. But as a matter of fact and by preference, he generally votes for a socialist deputy to represent him in the French chamber. He does so; however, he maintains with characteristic, wire-drawn Gallic logic, not as a syndicalist but as a private citizen of the Republic. In plain truth, the tenets of his own party estop it from putting candidates in the field. Hence, if the French syndicalist wishes to exercise his franchise in national affairs, he must vote for a political party, and it is only natural that he should elect as his choice the

most radical candidate soliciting election. But, even while denying the value of a political state, the syndicalists have not let their theoretical views deter them from ventilating their practical grievances. They have quite freely sacrificed consistency to take sides on measures which threatened their position or affected the interests of the labor classes.

Of much greater significance than the relationship of the C.G.T. to other French radical parties or groups, is the evolution that has gone on within the organization. The interest here lies in the evolution, in practice of its fighting program and its tactics rather than in its barren quarrels with the socialists. In recent years, the processes of growth have not left the syndicalist policy unchanged, but growth and experience apart, there have been two capital events to affect it: the Great War and the Russian Revolution. Both of these historic circumstances have been of supreme importance to every European labor party. They have been of special relevancy to the French.

Compared with its past, the C.G.T. has lost much of its revolutionary ardor. Today, it can no longer claim to be a homogeneous body of like-minded revolutionaries. The signs of dissension and of scission have appeared and become acute with the continued ascendancy of the right wing over the left. In the last three congresses the moderate party has been in control. Moderation has thus become much larger than a cloud the size of a man's hand on the syndicalistic horizon. "For another year the C.G.T., which should have taken a decisive step to the left has navigated in the waters of the right, totally abandoning direct action, its methods and principles," complained the left wing in a resolution put forward by them in Orleans in 1920, which was defeated. The controlling moderate group in its temper, activity, and general position, is not distinguishable from the moderate group in the American Federation of Labor or in the congress of English trade unionists. Tried by the great touchstone of its attitude to bolshevism, the C.G.T. has definitely declined to affiliate with the third international congress at Moscow. It unites with the moderate group in adhering to the non-Bolshevik congress at Amsterdam and to the International Labor Office of the League of Nations.

Clearly, the C.G.T. at present, may be counted among the labor parties of reform rather than of revolution.

The influences that have wrought this "sea change" upon the Confédération Générale du Travail may be conveniently grouped under: (1) changes due to growth and experience; (2) changes due to the war; (3) changes due to the Russian Revolution. Let us examine these in turn.

1. *Changes due to Growth and Experience.*—Under ordinary circumstances, fifteen years is a considerable period in the life of a popular movement. Tendencies which at the outset may just be detected have time to reveal their ephemeral nature or their genuine strength. Tactics hopefully advocated are put to the test. If they prove successful they harden into regular modes of action; failing they are discarded. The personal equation changes rather rapidly. Above all, the severe logic of everyday events in a hundred trifling ways puts its own ply into the spirit of the organization. All of these factors have influenced syndicalism in France. Leaders, such as Griffuelhes, Lagardelle, Pouget, who were active at the time of its stormy inception, have disappeared. They have either been removed by old age or death, or have withdrawn from active work. (Victor Griffuelhes broke a long silence February 8, 1920, to attack the moderates and to urge adherence to Moscow.) Their places have been taken by leaders such as Jouhaux, Merrheim, and Bidegaray, men of a more cautious stripe, who are less concerned with a struggle against capital *à outrance* than with obtaining concrete benefits for their class. These men insist upon "the revolutionary value of the daily victories obtained which improve the conditions of the life of the worker and partially free him from the insecurity of bondage."¹ Thus, once again in a revolutionary movement we have the disingenuous, slippery language of opportunism becoming the consecrated formula.

The general strike, as the supreme tactic of syndicalism, has not lived up to its advance notices. It has not been so successful a weapon as was confidently anticipated. No really large tangible results have accrued for its use in a number of attempts.

¹ From the resolution passed by the G.C.T. Congress at Orleans, September, 1920. Proposed by M. Jouhaux.

In consequence the strike leaders have had to comfort themselves and their followers with the view that the struggle has stimulated the morale of the class-conscious proletariat. This has not been succulent food and in this respect even, experience is inducing a cooler psychology. Events have shown to the C.G.T. leaders that a social movement cannot be kept boiling at white heat all the time. Intense and passionate effort which fails to win substantial rewards brings in its train corroding disappointment, increased hatred, it is true, against the capitalist, but very often destructive recriminations between leaders and disintegration within the rank and file. Signs of this have been threatening syndicalism.¹ As a result, it has been basing itself more and more upon a calculating reasoning watchfulness and less upon tempestuous *élan*. Utility is replacing hatred as the driving force. Thus purely as a result of the normal working of a revolutionary idea, institutionalizing itself in organization and maintaining itself through time, we have in French syndicalism considerable loss of ardor of the initial impulse. There is a less naïve faith in the virtue of violent weapons, coupled with the development of a wary opportunism, intent upon improving as opportunity offers, the condition and status of the laboring class.

2. *The influence of the war.*—To the organized wage-earning groups in every country the war brought difficult problems of principle and policy. Upon the French group these fell with devastating suddenness. At least half of her energetic and militant syndicalists felt directly the power of the invader. It is well known that the portion of France occupied by Germany was, to a large degree, the center of her industrial life, though the effect that this must necessarily have upon the French labor movement has almost entirely escaped consideration. At the outset, it may be premised that with the declaration of war French syndicalism did not escape the odium that fell upon international labor movements generally in the allied countries. The ambiguous attitude of the German socialists came in to complete the discomfiture of the

¹ The Railway Workers lost two-thirds of their effectives after their unsuccessful strike of May, 1920. Et. Martin Saint-Léon speaking before the Union du Commerce et de L'Industrie pour la défense sociale, May 25, 1921.

French socialists. The latter were thus smitten with triple blows: their homes and their factories were being ravished by the enemy; their clamant appeal to internationalism revealed itself to be fruitless, a cruel illusion; the concentrated anger and contempt of the French people was kindled against them for the anti-military, anti-patriotic policy with which they had been identified in the past. Their organization reeled under the shock.

In the present C.G.T. we may distinguish the effects of this *bouleversement*. The change is pronounced. The dominating conception of the new movement in France today may be termed critical realism—the cold-blooded study of the situation “*positive*.” This idea recurs again and again in the current writings and speeches of the French syndicalists. This is scarcely surprising as the thousands of French workingman who endured the hardships of the Great War are unlikely to be carried away by general theories that ignore the realities of “*la patrie*,” racial antipathies, and the national state. These imponderables have shown how real they are and that they must be reckoned with. The study of the situation “*positive*” leads directly to concrete and ameliorative policies: to preoccupation with the problems of labor within national boundaries.

The effect of the war has gone deeper, however, than policy: it has eaten into the theoretical background of their position, and sent French revolutionaries back to Proudhon for inspiration. In the old days, while syndicalists refused to recognize parliamentary socialism as the open door to revolution, Marxian doctrines deeply impregnated the movement. Marx was their spiritual father even if they were wayward children. France accepted Marx with certain reservations. But the emphasis the French workman places on liberty makes him disinclined to view with native sympathy Marx’s closely regimented collectivity. It had been said, even before the war, that the French syndicalists would suffocate in the German movement. The French revolutionary organization never achieved, nor desired to achieve, the rigid discipline of the German. It has always been loose and always semi-independent. Moreover, at present, it need scarcely be said that Marx’s nationality does not recommend his doctrine. Above all there is the flaming

example of German socialism in the war and in revolution as a warning: in war, supporting an imperialistic dream, and in revolution buttressing a bourgeois government. There is, therefore, in France a recognition and a demand that tactics and theories must be along "French lines" and in accord with French ideas. Frenchmen maintain now, that a wrong turn was taken in following Marx. If we add to this view the natural feeling of French pride in French genius and the unwavering belief that in the past France has given ennobling and fecund conceptions of social order to the world, we must easily understand French labor's return to its native prophets. French syndicalists think of France as once more becoming the creatrix of new forms of social institution. In the organization of the C.G.T. the syndicalists believe that they foreshadowed the future organization of society.

In their defensive replies to the attacks that were launched against "*Cegetisme*" on account of its pre-war anti-military, anti-patriotic doctrines, the attack has been turned by picturing this pre-war attitude as a far-seeing protest against the idea of militarism and of war in general. They represent themselves as the harbingers, so to speak, of the ideas involved in the formation of the League of Nations as expressed by Viscount Grey, Lord Robert Cecil, and others. By this clever polemic they gloss over an antagonism to the army based upon its use in connection with strikes. This position necessarily entails affiliation with the International Labor Office established at Geneva and has laid the C.G.T. moderate leaders open to the charges made by the extremists of trafficking with the bourgeois states of the world. Thus the war has forced the C.G.T. into a critical realistic reconstruction of its position. Marx, dethroned, has been replaced by Proudhon.

3. *The influence of the Russian Revolution.*—The situation here is rather complex. The French reaction to the events in Russia has come through several phases. At the present time there is no doubt of the repeated attempts of the Russian leaders to capture the French organization for their own ends. Lenine hopes to replace syndicalism by bolshevism. This fact is the key to the suspicion and dissension that reigns among the leaders of the trade unions of France today. We must bear in mind that when the

Russian Revolution took place France, war-weary, was still fighting for her existence and that the Russian default was a severe blow to French hopes of an early victory over Germany. Next, we must remember that French security holders had bought largely of Russian issues and Russia dishonored her international obligations. Probably not many of the members of the C.G.T. were actually hit by this repudiation but it is certain the ramification of security investment goes down deeply into the humbler walks of life in France. This default added to the bitter feeling caused by the Russian withdrawal from the war among a great many of the French people. Public opinion became more and more stridently hostile to Russia and no modern movement past the stage of fanaticism becomes utterly regardless of public opinion. There is there a compelling force before which it bows. Moreover at this stage large numbers of the French proletariat were still with the colors while the leaders of the C.G.T. were more or less loyally observing the "*union sacrée*." Hence circumstances did not favor a close affiliation with bolshevism. It is certain there was a good bit of sympathy among the members of the C.G.T. for the Russian experiment at the outset. This led to a fear in France generally as to what would happen when the *poilu* should return to his economic affiliations after the war. But, for the reasons already set forth the *poilu* returned with a sense of reality and a desire for narrowed objectives that, on the whole, was quite unexpected. This checked the initial movement toward bolshevism. Very soon radical opinion became accurately informed as to the failure of bolshevism to solve the Russian industrial problems and perceived its evolution into a group dictatorship; the evidence was so complete it could not be disputed. Critical realism in France studied both phases and did not find either to its liking. The result is apparent in the widening of the basis of syndicalism and in the continued refusal of the C.G.T. majority to affiliate with the third international of Moscow.

At the outset, syndicalism represented the demand for a very narrow labor class domination of industry. Its point of view, in fact, was quite similar to that of bolshevism or the cruder forms of orthodox Marxian socialism. The need of competent direction

in industry seemed scarcely to be recognized and when urged upon the syndicalist was dismissed with a phrase or a shrug as one of the problems to be solved after victory had been obtained. Labor was conceived of in the strictly physical sense. Syndicalism was frankly anti-intellectual even where the powers of intellect and training were to be applied to the problems of industrial management. It is undoubtedly due to the experience of the Bolsheviks that syndicalism now recognizes other elements than physical brawn as necessary in the modern state to achieve production successfully.

Thus Jouhaux, writing in 1920, declares:

We do not consider, in effect—and it is time to say it here—that all the effort necessary to produce limits itself to the co-operation of the workers, properly speaking. We all know the rôle which the technicians play and it is with them that we intend to work.¹

The technician thus enters syndicalistic thought as a necessary element in industrial organization. “Technician” is a conveniently vague term with the great recommendation that it is without markedly bourgeois connotations. Nevertheless, it can be stretched to cover everything from a skilled engineer to the works’ manager, or even at a pinch to the director of an enterprise. By including the technician in the scheme of organization, syndicalism meets the criticism that were it to achieve success in France, the results would be sure and certain ruin comparable to that produced by bolshevism in Russia. Thus as syndicalism has grown in experience and maturity, amid the stirring events that mark our times it has gained in breadth of view but has lost much of the fiery enthusiasm that marked its youth. Having definitely established its view point with regard to economic revolution in a sharp struggle with socialism and become a powerful body in France it has traveled in this respect also the familiar road to opportunism. Purporting to be a genuinely revolutionary party, all the symptoms of senescence have appeared. The organization is engaged in internecine conflict growing out of the attempts to connect syndicalism to the third international of Moscow and through the appearance of “*noyaux*” or of “*noyautage*” within its ranks.

¹ Léon Jouhaux, *Le Syndicalisme et le C.G.T.*, Paris, 1920, p. 240.

The *noyau* is the latest development. While the moderates have been in control of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* for several years there has remained within it an active revolutionary minority led by Monmousseau of the *Cheminots* (railway workers), who have desired to bring the organization into a close working agreement with Moscow. At the congress of Lyons in 1919, the group was greatly outnumbered (1,633 to 324, 43 abstentions), on the fundamental difference as to whether the congress would follow the opportunism of Jouhaux or the communism of Lenine. When defeated, it seemed likely that the minority would withdraw to form a new revolutionary party. They were advised, however, by Lenine to remain within the C.G.T. and to form the nuclei of a new revolutionary group in the various constituent elements of the C.G.T. Hence we have the terms *noyau*, *noyautage*, and *noyauteur* which have come into use in France to distinguish this extreme group from the other members of the C.G.T. Before the congress of Orleans in September, 1920, the members of the *noyau* held a conference and decided to institute a *Comité Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire* (the C.S.R.), and to endeavor to form *noyaux* in the local groups. At the Orleans convention the *noyautist* resolution was defeated (602 votes to 1,479), which, although still overwhelming, showed clearly that the *noyaux* were gaining in strength. The skilful solicitations of Russia, the economic reaction that has followed peace, together with the advantage in attracting followers that a positive revolutionary program has in comparison with a moderate policy are the chief reasons for this growth. In fact they were growing altogether too fast for the peace of mind of the regulars. On November 8, 1920, the National Confederal Council of the C.G.T. voted by 72 to 25 (23 abstentions), to expel them and a very bitter situation developed. In February, 1921, the N.C.C. carried the fight a step farther with threats against the Seine Federation of trade unions which was supporting the *Comité Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire*.

The controversy, in the meantime, had become very much extended. It became impossible to enforce the threat of expulsion. Accordingly in May, 1921, the National Confederal Council, with a view to forcing the issue to a conclusive decision, succeeded in

having the general congress of the convention advanced from September to July. This congress was held at Lille beginning July 25, 1921. The meetings were most stormy, delegates even engaging on one occasion, it is said, in a free fight. On the critical vote, however, the moderates retained control by a narrow majority (1,350 to 1,338). Meanwhile, the Comité Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire or the noyau, as it is more familiarly called, continues to increase in strength and appears likely to persist. Its organization and growth mark the development of a new revolutionary party in France, calculated to oust syndicalism and the old Confédération Générale du Travail. The movement will be dominated by a new set of extremists allied to bolshevism and with its back turned to the moderate tendencies of recent years. It is only a matter of time until the old organization falls before its assaults or becomes separated from it and classed with other reform parties.

The wheel has thus come full circle and where syndicalism was fifteen years ago—in the van of the revolutionary movement—the noyau is today.

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NOTE.—Two recent excellent studies are:

Syndicalisme Ouvrier et Syndicalisme Agricole, Et. Martin Saint-Léon, Payot, Paris, 1920.

Le Syndicalisme et la C.G.T., Léon Jouhaux, Bibliothèque D'Evolution Sociale sous la Direction de Charles Dulot, Paris, 1920.